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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the competency-based early childhood preservice program at Iowa's Mount Mercy College, which is for people working with children from birth through age 8, including children with special needs. Program content encompasses five competency areas: child growth and development; developmentally appropriate learning; health, safety, and nutrition; family and community collaboration; and professionalism. This paper highlights child growth and development, emphasizing two subcategories: (1) understanding individual differences in development and learning including risk factors, developmental variations, and developmental patterns of specific disabilities and special abilities and (2) recognizing that children are best understood in the contexts of family, culture, and society and that cultural and linguistic diversity influence development and learning. The paper gives examples of assignments designed to meet these competencies. The assignments model the full range of competencies to be developed in preservice early childhood teachers. Assignments include: completing home visits; observing and anecdotal record keeping in field placements; student teaching in early childhood placements; applying current research; conducting individual and group assessments; interviewing parents and early childhood teachers; developing Individual Education Plans; developing cultural sensitivity; and demonstrating the ability to make accommodations for children with special needs. (SM)

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Competency-Based Early Childhood Teacher Education
Merilee Rosberg – Mount Mercy College

Mount Mercy College is a small Catholic liberal arts college located in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, about 230 miles west of Chicago. Mount Mercy has a strong, fully accredited teacher education program. In 1999 the Iowa Department of Education implemented a new state mandated competency-based teacher education program for individuals working with children from birth through age eight including children with special needs. As the faculty examined and redeveloped the program to meet the new standards, we strove to maintain a balance in course work to provide for theory and practice. The faculty believes that students need to have appropriate knowledge, skills and dispositions in order to work effectively with young children.

Program content encompasses the following five competency areas:

1) Child growth and development
2) Developmentally appropriate learning
3) Health, safety and nutrition
4) Family and community collaboration
5) Professionalism

This paper will address the first of these competency areas, "Child growth and development."

Child Growth and Development

Students will:

1. Understand the nature of child growth and development for infants and toddlers and primary school children through age 8, both typical and atypical, in area of cognition, language development, physical motor, social-emotional, aesthetics, and adaptive behavior.
2. Understand individual differences in development and learning including risk factors, developmental variations and developmental patterns of specific disabilities and special abilities.
3. Recognize that children are best understood in the contexts of family, culture and society and that cultural and linguistic diversity influences development and learning.

This paper will address only subcategories two and three. These goals will be examined and examples of assignments to meet these competencies will be discussed. Note that the assignments described below, in aggregate, model the full range of competencies to be developed in students enrolled in the early childhood education program at Mount Mercy College. Assignments include, but are not limited to, the following components:

- Home visits
- Observations and anecdotal record keeping in field experience placements
- Student teaching in early childhood placements
- Application of current research
- Individual and group assessments
- Interviewing parents and early childhood teachers

- Development of an Individual Education Plan
- Cultural sensitivity
- Demonstration of ability to make accommodations for children with special needs

Understanding Individual Differences in Development and Learning

Each course in the early childhood program gives education students opportunities to look at individual differences in child development and learning. Assignments also require students to show competence in this area. Six different early childhood courses provide appropriate experiences in this area.

ED143: *Child and Family Nutrition* – One objective in this course states: "Students will be able to apply an understanding of physical growth and development with nutrition facts and concepts in assessing a young child's diet, making recommendations for appropriate modifications." This also requires students to know normal developmental stages of eating behavior of young children and to understand appropriate roles in influencing the eating habits of young children.

One assignment requires each student to select a child to observe in a home setting and conduct a nutrition and health assessment. This includes a parent interview. In order to complete this assignment, students must read health guidelines on children with special health care needs (Peterson, et al, 1994) and discuss their parent interview.

ED270: *Care and Education of Infants and Toddlers* – A key objective for this course is "Students will study typical developmental patterns and developmental variations of young infants, mobile infants and toddlers through two years of age."

One assignment requires students to evaluate the learning environment from the child's point of view. This requires students to understand developmental levels as well as individual needs. Students participate in a 20 hour field experience with young children and read required material in journals such as *Young Children* and *International Journal of Early Childhood: Journal of OMEP.*

ED272: *Creative Experiences* – Students will sharpen observational skills of individual differences while at the same time become aware of how the center creates an atmosphere of acceptance in which each child can grow toward a positive self-concept. Another goal is to develop skills in varying assessment techniques which can support planning to address the needs and strengths of each child.

In order to meet the above goals, students will observe and participate in an early childhood center for 9 weeks and a total of 36 hours. Each student will keep a log of his/her experience in which they relate experiences to assigned reading. As part of this assignment each student will conduct a child study using specific assessment tools.

ED332: *Parent School Relationships* – Students will 1) assess their own personal competencies in handling crisis situations, 2) become more aware of community services

and resources, and 3) examine communication skills which support a partnership approach. Students will also understand the desirability of moving beyond successful individual parent-teacher encounters to case advocacy and policy making.

As an assignment in this course, students will complete a case study, visit an area agency or family resource center and write an ethics reflection paper. In this paper, students reflect on the ethical role of an early childhood educator. These activities will assist students in understanding the need to examine risk factors, developmental variations and the specific needs of children with disabilities and special abilities. It will make them aware of agencies and resources that are available to assist families. In addition, the ethics paper will give them an opportunity to examine their own views and to realize the responsibilities of teachers as child advocates.

ED263: *Educating the Exceptional Person*

Two objectives in this course are: Students will recognize the characteristics and distinctive problems of exceptional learners, and they will review assessment procedures that can be used to identify students with special needs.

In this course, students are required to complete a seven-week field experience where they observe and participate in a special education setting for a total of 21 hours. Students also interview the classroom teacher to obtain more information about the children including their strengths and needs. Based on this field experience and specific readings, students share findings in class with their peers. Students examine a variety of

assessment tests and procedures and answer questions regarding procedures on an in-class writing assignment.

ED359: *Student Teaching in Kindergarten* - An important objective during students teaching is to develop skills in observing, recording, and interpreting behavior of children and planning appropriate guidance strategies based on these observations. (Students complete eight weeks in a Kindergarten classroom and eight weeks in a primary classroom.)

In fulfilling this objective, students choose a child in their student teaching placement to observe and write a case study which includes the child's level of functioning as well as the child's needs and strengths. Students decide how they will share this information with parents and suggestions they have for helping this child to make successful progress and growth.

Children are Best Understood in the Contexts of Family, Culture and Society

It is important for future teachers to recognize that children are best understood in the contexts of family, culture and society and that cultural and linguistic diversity influences development and learning. The following objectives and assignments give students opportunities to examine these ideas.

ED143: *Child and Family Nutrition* – Students will be sensitized to the barrage of nutrition related items available and will be able to critically evaluate nutrition

information directed to adults and children, including basic knowledge of nutrients, developmentally appropriate practices, and sensitivity to cultural differences.

Students read materials such as that found in *Food and Culture in America* (Kittler & Sucher, 1995) regarding cultural sensitivity. They also select a cookbook designed for use with young children and then prepare and serve the class a nutritious snack. The snack is to be integrated with a nutritional curriculum activity. Students also need to be aware that modifications will need to be made based on the child's culture and developmental level.

ED270: *Care and Education of Infants and Toddlers* – An important objective for future teachers is to develop awareness of a multicultural perspective toward early care and socialization. As part of this course, students will participate in a 20-hour field experience where they observe and interact with young children.

One assignment for students is to observe self or employee language traits. Another activity is to note adult/child interactions. It is important for students to be aware of their own culture and language traits. If they understand their own culture better, it will be easier to look at the backgrounds of children and their families. They can see the various ways that the children interact with each other and the teacher. Students may need to adjust their expectations based on each child's needs and cultural background.

ED272: *Creative Experiences* – Students will display the personal behaviors expected of pre-service teachers, along with such attributes as willingness to grow professionally, work collaboratively, and demonstrate leadership. In so do doing, they will need to cultivate an appreciation of diversity.

Several activities will be assigned to enable students to understand and demonstrate this competency. Students will be expected to do a minimum of three anecdotal records on a child, to administer the Brigance Checklist, and to keep a Multicultural Record. They will also complete a self-evaluation regarding their attitudes and performance in an early childhood center.

ED322: *Parent School Relationships* – The main objective here is to study some of the factors within home settings which may affect a child's development and behavior… Differences between families and schools as educational institutions will be highlighted. Emphasis will be placed on eliminating barriers between parents and teachers and supporting parent competence.

Each student keeps a detailed journal. Besides noting observations regarding individual children, students will be aware of parent-teacher relationships, differences between parents and teachers and special needs of various families. The college student visits the home with the cooperating teacher to observe the home environment and how the parent and child interact. Strengths of families should be noted as well as cultural and linguistic

diversity. Students should record their observations concerning the influences of culture and background on development and learning.

ED263: *Educating the Exceptional Person* – The key objective here is "Students will develop a basic understanding of effective ways to work with families of students with special needs."

Students will complete an Individual Education Plan using a CD entitled "What's Best for Matthew" (Egan, 2000). This CD allows students to interview parents, teachers, aides, and administrators. Students write an IEP for Matthew setting long-term goals, determining measurable short-term objectives for each goal, deciding upon the evaluation criteria to be used, and identifying the resources needed for fulfilling these objectives. They can also compare their final IEP with one written by experts. After completing this plan, students discuss their IEP in class.

After reading materials on working with families and listening to a speaker on this topic, students are given a specific scenario about a family who has a child with special needs. In small groups they will discuss this scenario and list effective ways that they might choose to work with this family.

ED359 *Student Teaching in Kindergarten* – Students will understand the role of a professional in interactions with other staff, administrative personnel, parents and the community, and be able to make worthwhile contributions in these areas.

Students keep a journal regarding their professional interactions with others and reflect on how they can be most effective in working with other professionals and parents. They also write and send a special communication to parents. It might be a communication regarding work and activities in the classroom or it could be a letter to a specific parent regarding progress of his/her child. The importance of positive feedback to parents is stressed.

Conclusion:

Working with young children is both a privilege and a responsibility. As future teachers, our students need both theory and practice. They must be aware of the basic needs of all children and the specific needs of individual children who come from a variety of backgrounds. They also need opportunities to work with children and to plan for children who have specific disabilities and special abilities. In order to do this our students must understand their own family and cultural background and be willing to learn about families with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

As teachers and supervisors of these future teachers, we must be sure that we plan assignments and experiences that will help our students to grow. They need exposure to journals and texts that discuss developmentally appropriate practices as well as multiple perspectives on the quality of early childhood programs. They must have opportunities to observe and teach in a variety of educational settings. The Teacher Education Faculty at Mount Mercy strives to provide these experiences as well as support and feedback while students are learning to be effective teachers of young children.

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